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ABSTRACT

Students and teachers in adult literacy programs in Columbus, Ohio, and London, England, were interviewed using structured questions relating to past educational history, perceptions of encouragers and barriers to participation in education, support systems, the nature of success, and future expectations. Those interviewed were selected by teachers and administrators using a process of elimination based on willingness and availability to be interviewed. Through the data collection process a clear subpopulation of literacy students emerged: women in development who had been transplanted in developed country situations and were now pursuing adult education. All these women shared the same goals of participation in adult education with the hope of obtaining a degree or certificate that would be recognized. Results, reported in anecdotal comments, showed that most of the women felt that they were pursuing education for themselves, for their own satisfaction, and for their futures. Although they often lacked support from their families, they found support from friends and school personnel. Many found the school experience difficult, but they kept going, and the experience boosted their confidence. The study concluded that women of whatever educational level in developed countries often are disempowered by their backgrounds and are "women in development" much like the women literacy students. (KC)

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LITERACY ISSUES OF "WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT" IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Ohio Association for Adult & Continuing Education
Airport Radisson, Columbus, Ohio

April 21, 1989

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Each day I live, I want to be, a day to give the best of me. I'm only one, but not alone, my finest day, is yet unknown.

I broke my heart for ev'ry gain, to taste the sweet, I faced the pain. I rise and fall, yet through it all, this much remains...

I want one moment in time, when I'm more than I thought I could be. When all of my dreams are a heartbeat away, and the answers are all up to me. Give me one moment in time, when I'm racing with destiny. Then in that one moment in time, I will feel, I will feel eternity.

I've lived to be, the very best, I want it all, no time for less. I've laid my plans, now, lay the chance, here in my hands.

You're a winner, for a lifetime, if you seize that one moment in time; make it shine.

Give me one moment in time, when I'm more than I thought I could be. When all of my dreams are a heartbeat away, and the answers are all up to me. Give me one moment in time, when I'm racing with destiny. Then in that one moment of time I will be free.

- "One Moment in Time"
Albert Hammond, John Bettis

INTRODUCTION

My discussion today will focus on the results of a particular portion of a research study I conducted earlier this year with adult students enrolled in literacy/adult basic education programs in Columbus, Ohio, and London, England. My original study included both men and women enrolled in classes associated with two school systems: Columbus Public Schools Continuing Education Program offering Adult Basic Education and the Inner London Education Authority Adult Return to Study and Access courses.

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Kamla Bhasin (1984), in an article arguing the why and how of literacy for women suggested that "Often campaigners for literacy start with statements such as 'illiteracy is an offense to mankind,' and ones giving the impression that illiteracy is the same as ignorance and lack of intelligence. Such statements are false and smack of a patronizing attitude toward the millions of illiterates in whose name such campaigns are started" (p. 37).

I am not here today to parade the injustices associated with illiteracy, nor to argue for the promotion of a fair educational system which provides the opportunity for all to be literate. My plan for today includes just three objectives: (1) to increase your awareness of the plight of a particular group of adult literacy students, (2) to heighten your sensitivity surrounding this particular group's needs, (3) and to motivate you to learn more about what you might do to improve these individuals' chances of success.

Before continuing with these objectives let me set the stage by providing some general baseline statistics and definitions related to adult literacy. According to Hunter and Harman (1979), "Adult basic education programs are intended for persons who are 16 years of age or older, are out of school, and have not completed high school. These programs include courses from the first through the eighth grade levels in reading, language, arithmetic, English as a second language, as well as General Education Development courses which prepare students to pass a GED test and receive a certificate. Estimates on the number of persons eligible for ABE programs range from 54 to 64 million adults. However, only two to four percent of this target population participate in ABE programs" (cited in Grede & Friedlander, 1981, p. 1). Statistics as of October 1988 report that about three million adults in the United States were enrolled in ABE programs in 1987 with 65% of those at the zero to eighth grade levels (AAACE, 1988).

Jack Mezirow has suggested that ABE students represent "an astonishing potpourri of ethnic backgrounds, educational achievements (from being totally illiterate in any language to Ph.D.'s with limited English mastery), ages (adolescence to old age), generation of citizenship (first, second, third, and so on), middle to lower socio-economic status, native ability (from clearly retarded to exceptionally bright), and psychiatric range from quite disturbed to normal" (cited in Grede & Friedlander, 1981, p. 11). One characteristic which does not vary greatly, however, is that of socio-economic status, with most adult literacy students being described as "disadvantaged." Numbers suggest that about 14% are unemployed, 15-25% are on welfare and over half of those remaining have unskilled jobs with income below the poverty level (Grede & Friedlander, 1981). Mezirow's is an accurate description of the population included in my own study.

The topic highlighted today involves a subpopulation from this original study which emerged and inspired a "study within a study." Note that these individuals were not English as a Second Language (ESL) students, but were those individuals seeking further education for the purpose of earning a degree or certificate; those who were essentially preparing to "fit" into the major culture through mainstream education.

I think it appropriate at this time to discuss briefly the concept of culture, or more specifically, subculture. Spengler (1961) suggested that "every culture stands in a deeply symbolical, almost...mystical, relation to the Extended, the space in which and through which it strives to actualize

itself." Furthermore, Benedict (1935) proposed that "this relation to a central purpose guides the Pattern of the culture or the customs, institutions, and traits of that group of people who subscribe to the idioms of the culture."

Heimlich and Van Tilburg (1987) suggested that within the "great" societies, there are people who are bound by a myriad of variant views: these people may be held together through a unique history, through geographic constraints, sets of experiences or goals in life, or perhaps through personal beliefs and lifestyles. To these groups of deviants is given the label of "subculture" which in a historic sense, refers to a "lesser" culture than the great. The connotation for the purpose of this discussion is that great, lesser, and sub refer to size and not superiority, a view which aligns with Lasswell (1952) who suggested that "the culture itself is not "smaller" than the great culture...the group which enacts it is smaller than the great society."

In my original study, the hypothesis was that adults share common experiences, thoughts, motivations, decision-making strategies and incentives related to lifelong learning, which are essentially "untouched" by the "great" culture to which they belong but that actually place them all together into a specific subculture. Members of this subculture, adult learners pursuing additional formal education, share a world view and symbolic representation of that world view. Members are bound by their convictions, determination, and their beliefs and values related to adult education. Simply stated, adult learners, regardless of nationality, language, or the "great" culture to which they belong, will exhibit similar motivations, hopes and dreams related to continuing adult education.

All people are members of some subculture, in fact, many subcultures, and the values ascribed have constant impact upon how a member will view the world as it relates to that subculture. These values, shaped by experiences and traditions, become necessary elements needed by an educator to aid in his/her understanding of that group and to be effective in working within a specific subculture. Gaining this understanding of the subculture was the main purpose for my study. My intention was to study past experiences and traditions, current beliefs and future expectations of adults enrolled in adult basic education programs with the hope that any elements shared among these individuals could be offered as characteristics representative of that subculture.

The hypothesis suggesting that membership in the "great" culture, i.e., Great Britain/United States, would not have extreme influence on the world view of the adult students from those cultures was fairly well supported. Granted, the variance in "treatment" (culture) was not as great as it might have been as in a study of the United States and perhaps, Uganda, but there were noticeable differences (related to adult education) in economic class division, formal schooling for children, and importance placed on continuing education between those two cultures.

What was noticed, however, and what initially spurred today's topic, was that within the subculture of "adult students," there was an additional subculture clearly related to the demographic, gender, more particularly, women from "developing situations." This finding was supported by the World Assembly of Adult Education (1985) as the report from the 1985 conference made this

suggestion: "Women are affected by a common problem that results from their subordinate relationship with men. This is a structural phenomenon which crosses societies, cultures, and social classes, although its manifestations may differ" (p. 102).

Audrey Smock (1981) also supported the identification of a subculture related to women in education in her book, Women's Education in Developing Countries, as she said "...it is clear that education is not a kind of modern day magic wand that can eliminate all gender-related inequalities and overcome deeply rooted structural inequities in the manner in which societies allocate resources and rewards. Men's advantages accrue from many sources other than the earlier and greater availability of education" (p. 279). Pat Ellis (1984) claimed that "...many of the skills imparted by the formal education system often retard rather than promote social and economic development...the educational system continues to socialize girls into accepting conventional females roles..." (p. 45-46).

These studies and hundreds of others like them have helped me make the case for the identification of a subculture of adult literacy students. I would like to spend the remainder of the time today with that subculture which I've called adult "women in development" students in developed countries. The membership of this group contains women from third world countries and women from third world country-like environments.

Related to women and education, the description of a third world country-like environment would include (Clark, 1983):

- the absence of professionally-oriented female role models
- the woman working at home/on the farm without being counted as part of the labor force
- cultural attitudes interfere with the woman's full participation in education (i.e., women who are more educated have less children)
- lack of relevance of girls' education to the local/national economy
- the woman having little free time to use with education

Included as a part of those "third world country-like" environments would be extreme rural, economically impoverished U.S. communities and similar areas in other developed countries.

First, I will describe the process of the study. And second, I will present results in words, music, and pictures.

THE PROCESS

Students and teachers associated with both programs were interviewed using structured questions relating to past educational history, perceptions of encouragers/barriers, support systems, the nature of success, and future expectations. Those interviewed were selected by teachers/administrators using a process of elimination based on availability and willingness. Almost all students available were also willing to be interviewed. For many in the U.S. portion of the study, the interview was the first opportunity they had had to talk about themselves related to school experiences. Not so for those in London as discussions about goals, aspirations, fears, and successes were a regular part of the adult educational process. In either case, those interviewed were very cooperative and appeared to enjoy the process.

Interviews lasted about one hour and often involved emotional sequences of sadness, anger, embarrassment, and determination. (In fact, the word determination became the "buzz word" for the British interviews.) The typical interview would begin with a quiet, almost hushed, discussion of past educational experiences. The progression would include a very matter of fact description of personal family history.

Emotion would begin to appear in the interview when "barriers and encouragers" to the decision to return to school were discussed. Issues of family/friend support, embarrassment, fear of failure, feelings of "being dumb," and frustration with position in life all surfaced as factors related to the initial decision to return to school. And most of these factors carried with them experiences deeply connected to the educational system previously experienced. Voices were raised, tears were shed, fists were pounded, heads and eyes were lowered, but in almost all interviews, smiles appeared when the future was discussed.

As soon as data collection began, it became apparent that we were not dealing with just two populations, those who had attended school in England and those from an American educational system. But there were many individuals from a variety of countries, subcultures, and educational systems.

It was at this point that a clear subpopulation of literacy students emerged: women in development who had been transplanted in developed country situations and were now pursuing adult education. Some of these women were considered well educated in their own countries but were now in a country which did not recognize their educational qualifications. Others were not well educated, having dropped out of formal education at an early age. But, regardless of their actual educational achievements, they all shared the same goals of participation in "first world" adult education with the hope of obtaining a degree, diploma, or certificate which would be recognized.

I would like to share some of the findings related to this special group of literacy students. Keep in mind that my study produced qualitative data; there are no numbers, scales, means, nor t-tests; only words and pictures to capture and portray an individual's perceptions of reality.

RESULTS

Why Return to School?

For Me

"There's somethin' more in me than washing', 'n', cookin', 'n' watchin' a chil'."

"You make up your mind that you wanna do it for you, not for nobody else, just for you."

"I don't want to go mop floors. I want to learn how to write. It's my only goal."

"I wanted to do something but wasn't sure just what. I just wanted to get out of the house rather than sit there."

"My mom hasn't got much in her life because she put too much of herself in us and hadn't held back any for herself. I don't want it to happen to me. I want something for myself. This is totally selfish of me."

"For me, I've got a child and I want a better future."

"Totally for me. It's selfish. I want it so bad. I need it so bad."

"That's one of the reasons I came back; to find that bit of space for me."

Others discussed careers, moving up in the world, and gaining respect from others. One woman talked about how she just wanted her husband to think she wasn't dumb.

Concerns Related to the Return to School

Embarrassment

"It's like laying your personal self naked."

"I was terrified. Just going in. I walked up the stairs, came back down, had a cigarette, walked up again, came back down, had another cigarette, and I think I was on my third or fourth trip out when the tutor came out and said, 'Are you with the Return to Study group?' and I mumbled something about yes and she dragged me in."

Probability of Success

"I've gone on years and years as I was before I come to school because I felt insecure and vulnerable because it sounded different, a gamble. And you don't know if you'll be worse off."

Others discussed their low skill level, hatred of formal education, bad experiences with teachers and being able to juggle all their responsibilities with the addition of school.

Did You Ever Feel Like Quitting?

"Oh yes, many times. I mean we would come out to go to school and then go out for breakfast. I'd say we were acting like a couple of school kids. But we'd always end up talking about school when we were at breakfast, how well we were doing. I mean, hell, we've even done fractions on the bathroom wall."

"[when the bad times came] I was saying, 'Why is this happening to me? Why, when I want to do something for myself?' There are other people that have to start problems for you or make you uncomfortable for no reason whatsoever."

"No, I ask my teacher again and again and sometimes she show me so I finally understand."

"I'm more confident. I don't know where I'm going but I know where I'm at and I feel like I could cope with anything life can throw at me, I can throw it back, pick meself up."

"[Before starting school] you would have heard a completely different person, a very insecure person, a person who didn't have a lot to look forward to. Very boring, shy person who didn't have much to say for herself."

"Others say I've got more confident and I don't talk about babies all the time."

"I'm a lot more confident. I'm not gonna agree with my husband just because I haven't got an opinion. I found meself more opinionated about things."

"All the time I'm at home, people find me things to do. You don't have that bit of time for yourself. But now I'm coming here, I've gained the strength to say, hold on a minute. Today's my day or this afternoon I'm doing something for me and not you. You can wait."

Knowledge and Skills

"Those things that were so asleep in my head, I didn't realize it 'til I got to school that nouns and verbs, I knew what they were but they were just asleep in my head."

Others discussed their futures as being brighter. One individual perceived herself as more intelligent. Another believed that she would have money and a real home some day due to her education.

CONCLUSIONS

I wonder how many of us recognize ourselves in those comments; or at least a part of ourselves. That part on the inside that takes on the characteristics of a women in development, disempowered by our backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, values, social context, economic or political constraints or whatever chains us to our world views and therefore includes us in that subculture.

As a women who has a "woman in development" side to herself, I cannot do enough research, speak to enough people, write enough articles, nor spend enough time with literacy issues of women in development. What I have shared today is just a tiny piece of the patchwork in the quilt. I'd like to end where I began; with the thoughts of Hammond and Bettis, but let's listen to the words set to music.

Family Support/Non-support

Support by family and friends varied. Many found support in people outside of formal family and friend networks such as social workers, class mates, tutors, and neighbors.

"My mom would say, 'Oh, you can't do fashion. You can't do secretarial.' There's always some reason. 'You can't do anything.' Nobody's really encouraged me. It's just myself."

"I did get pressures from my family but they wanted me to be one thing and I wanted to do something else."

"Having to get the kids off to school and then get here, it was a bit of a rush. And then having to get back by 3:30, you'd go home and have to cook dinner. Some days you'd get up and feel, 'Oh, I don't want to do this.' But it was just up to you to struggle on to the end. If you want to get somewhere, you just have to struggle on."

"Sometimes I don't want to be here because of my husband give me a hard time. I try to explain to him but he don't understand. He told me when I marry, it wasn't to go to school. I told him it wasn't to get a job either."

"It's just a hassle to clean up the house. I get up at 4:00 in the morning just to get done because I hate to come home to a dirty house."

"My fear is the math. I also got troubles sometimes in English. So I ask my son or take his school book and he explain it down to the level that I can understand it."

"My husband, he usually, he always put me down. But now he says I can do it, I think he accepted the idea and he likes it in a way. He not say I'm stupid again no more because I listen to the lady across the street and she say, 'You not, you can do it, so don't say you stupid,' so he not saying it either, no more."

"I didn't get support from my family. My boyfriend at the time said I was mad. I don't need anybody to encourage me now, because I'm self-motivated."

"He [husband] finds it inconvenient, really. He's used to coming home and having his dinner waiting and shirts ironed. He doesn't approve of me leaving the children. Though I was working full-time but that was different. he finds education different from work, and that's strange."

How Have You Changed?

Confidence

"I have more confidence in myself and I'm more happier with myself. It seemed like there was this dark side of me and all of a sudden it's opened up and I'm just happy with myself. I don't have to have nobody tell me."

"I'm a hell of a lot more confident within myself."

What Makes You Different?

Determination

"They [those who don't try] just go along in the slum of 'do nothin' and they just stay there."

"At least I can say, 'I tried.'"

Others said that they weren't different. They were just choosing another "way." Many of the constraints they suggested others had, such as child care, no money no time, or no support, they were also experiencing but just chose to persevere.

What Keeps You Going?

Determination

"You have to have that something pushing you toward a goal. You have to have it down and if you don't, I don't think you can make it because something can always interfere and block you from going to school."

Spiritual

"Every time I say me prayers, I ask me Lord to help me get me GED."

Self-Talk

"Once [I though about quitting]. Then I thought, 'Don't you dare, Sh----. You can't stay like this for the rest of your life.'"

"You get people saying, 'Oh, you can't hope to do this or that cause you're not experienced.' And I thought, 'Well, I'll show you.' The proof of the pudding is in the eating."

"I would talk to myself and say, 'You can do it.' I just kept telling myself, 'You want to do it and you can do it.' I just kept up with that and worked harder. Like at home, I would read and stay up and my brain was hurting but I kept pressing at it and saying, 'You can do it.'"

"I just say, 'Girl, it can't be no worse than what it was; it's got to better.'"

"Sometimes if you've really worked hard and nothing's going right and all of a sudden one little thing might click, and you think, 'Oh, well, I'm not so stupid after all.'"

Many talked about how their children needed a mother who was literate. They wished that they could help their children with homework. Others admitted that they did not know how they were able to continue - that they took it one day at a time.

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